

Growers and farmers of niche foods the winners from recent law change

By Mark Ross

A recent law change will see New Zealand farmers and growers able to access the latest technologies available on the global market. The Agricultural Compounds and Veterinary Medicines Amendment Bill, which increases data protection periods, was passed into law in November 2016.

A myriad of more targeted, environmentally-friendly and fit for purpose products will be researched, tested and brought to New Zealand. For our farmers and growers, this means that the toolbox available for protecting crops and treating animals will increase and improve.

The country will see a greater investment in research and development which will increase productivity, sustainability and international competitiveness. It will also benefit trade and animal welfare.

Farmers of minor species, such as goats and growers of minor crops are set to benefit the most from this law change.

Goat farmers will be able to access drenches specifically for goats. Under the old regime, they had to use some drenches 'off label'. In other words, the products they used were not registered for goats. Rather, they were tested and registered for use on cattle, sheep or horses. Off label use limits export trade as many overseas customers do not allow it. The increase in protection means that products will be registered with a label claim and a maximum residue limit set for that species.

Growers of minor crops - including citrus, kumara, leafy vegetables, tamarillos, berry fruit and feijoas - will be able to access products they need which are readily available overseas. These products were not introduced to New Zealand due to the small size of our market.

The reason growers and farmers were missing out on new technology was due to the lack of protection on the data proving that a product works, is safe for people and the environment, and that residues in produce are within acceptable limits. Manufacturers need to provide this information in order to get approval from two regulators: the Ministry for Primary Industries and the Environmental Protection Authority. The data package supplied in support of an application represents a significant investment – costing hundreds of thousands of dollars to assemble. Under the old regime this data was either not protected from competitors, or was not protected for long enough to satisfy the return on such a significant investment. There

was no protection for adding claims for minor crops to product labels. This saw industry grower groups having to fund a significant portion of the data generation themselves.

The research and development needed to register label claims requires trials (for residues and efficacy) to be carried out in New Zealand. The horticulture industry had to co-fund this work. Many close trading partners such as Australia, the USA and Canada have access to government funds as well as longer data protection periods. This put New Zealand growers at a disadvantage.

Now there is an incentive for product manufacturers to invest in researching solutions specifically for New Zealand pests and diseases. This means growers and grower groups can concentrate on what they do best, or invest in other causes such as preventing biosecurity incursions.

Access to new chemistry is also essential to replace older less sustainable products. Newer active ingredients and formulation types tend to be 'softer' chemistry than those traditionally used and as such have lower hazard classifications which pose less risk to human health, non-target organisms and the environment.

Having a wide range of products available also helps manage resistance. One of the key aspects of managing resistance is ensuring access to a suite of different active ingredients.

It also allows New Zealand farmers and growers access to new products favoured by trading partners. Access to the newest advances in technology allows them to comply with international best practice for the environment and food safety - and be internationally competitive. They are also more likely to have maximum residue levels set in our export markets.

A greater variety of new products will mean more solutions for growers and more treatments for animals. It does not mean that product use will increase overall. Instead, there will be more to choose from - ones that in most cases will be more environmentally-friendly, more effective and more targeted.

TABLE: Data protection periods

Data protection type	Before law change (years)	Now (years)
New active ingredients	5	10
New claims/uses/formulations	0	5
Reassessments	0	5

- Mark Ross is chief executive of Agcarm, the industry association for companies which manufacture and distribute crop protection and animal health products.